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ABSTRACT

On looking back at Head Start and other early childhood program plans, it is felt that several false assumptions have been made, the most obvious being the idea that poor children are understimulated; another is that poor children can be stereotyped, although there are relationships between poverty and health problems and language development. The proliferation of curriculum models that have been developed to stimulate the child are said to have resulted in increasing polarization of curriculum goals: skills, knowledge, and personal strengths and resources. Distinctions are drawn between the authoritarian and authoritative teacher, between teaching and performing, between children having fun and getting satisfaction, and between excitement and learning. Instead of trying to foster excitement in children, it is stated that a more valuable purpose in education would be to strengthen a child's capacities for sustained interest and effort. Introducing things to children because they are exciting is a pervasive quality of American society, but it is pointed out that this will not produce real learning needed to overcome social, psychological, and economic problems. (LH)

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PERSPECTIVES ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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Based on a speech presented at The Symposium on the Young Child, Honolulu, Hawaii, May, 1972.

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When you look back at the early days of Head Start and other early childhood program plans, the original ideas of the program designers seem both naive and oversimplified. The early designers based their plans on several premises. The first was that the preschool years are the most formative ones in children's development. Secondly, that those years should be full of stimulation or enrichment. Thirdly that the children of families who are poor do not have enough stimulation or enrichment, and finally that this supposed lack of stimulation causes children of the poor to be unresponsive to schooling. They hoped that a summer of enrichment would give children a headstart to later schooling.

Now, seven years later, are these ideas still accepted? Judging from the current scene and recent experience, the most obvious error in the thinking of the original designers was that poor children are understimulated. This is very rarely the case. Poor children frequently have rich environments--rich in social, cultural and linguistic experiences--as rich in meaning and complexity as the environments of children who are in a better off socioeconomic position.

Many children who are poor are over-stimulated. They very commonly suffer from insufficient adult help in making sense out of their rich environments. It is in this sense that many poor children can be said to "starve in the midst of plenty" and appear to be understimulated.

A second early idea that proved to be in error involves our stereotyping of a "poor" child. There is no "poor" child as such. There are

just as many individual differences among children who are poor - of every ethnic group - as there are among middle class white Americans children. The volumes of research which are processed through our Clearinghouse reveal in numerous tables and charts that individual differences are found in every population on every human characteristic! Interestingly enough, we forget that among both rich and poor, there are many children who feel unloved. Similarly we overlook the fact that among the poor,parents differ from each other just as wealthy parents do. Today we know that there are very few generalizations that can be made about people who are poor.

One of the few generalizations we <u>can</u> make, based on our own experiences and across the world, is that wherever you are, if you are poor your chances of serious health problems increase. Another which seems to hold for industrial nations is that the poorer you are, the more powerless you feel.

There is one other very consistent finding, although there are strong arguments about this one. Children's language development, which is crucial to so many aspects of development, seems to be slowed down with increasing size of the family and with increasing poverty. There are many different ways to intepret this point. Definitive answers to questions raised by these findings will be some time in coming.

We also know now that one summer of enrichment, or even one year of enrichment is not enough to help children. My own view is that we

oversold early childhood education, and that in one year it cannot be expected to overcome all the ill-effects of poverty on children or change the society which needs changing. Another point I want to make about overselling early childhood education is that children need good education from the earliest years and throughout their years of growth--for eighteen or twenty years. A community must care very deeply about the education of all of its children all through their development. Now I would like to turn to the research and development work of recent years, and to look at them in terms of a set of distinctions which I find useful.

In terms of the proliferation of curriculum models - at least 25 clearly identifiable ones - we can see increasing polarization of curriculum goals. From this effort in curriculum development we seem to have forgone the intention to prepare the preschooler for schooling, to introducing such schooling earlier and earlier in the child's life. I find it helpful, in looking at curriculum goals, to make a distinction between academic goals and intellectual goals. Academic goals have to do with helping children to become pupils, helping them learn to conform to the daily routines of classroom life, and strengthening their motivation to achieve. These goals are important, but they are not the same as intellectual goals. Intellectual goals are those which help the child to become a learner (rather than pupil), an enquirer, an investigator and which help the child to learn to study. Intellectual goals have to do with strengthening motivation for learning rather than motivation for achieving.

We have customarily stated the goals of education in academic terms, i.e. to help children to acquire skills, particularly the proverbal three R's. But there is impressive evidence that we do know how to reach these goals with young children. The results achieved by the application of operant conditioning techniques, and token economy systems indicate that we have at our disposal some very powerful techniques that "work". But it seems to me that the real problem in education is to help children--in fact all people, young or old--acquire the skills, knowledge and personal resources they need in such a way as to strengthen, safequard and enhance their sense of self-worth, diginity and self-respect, and encourage curiosity, compassion and tenderness. We must fashion an education that will achieve the mutually inclusive goals of acquiring skills, knowledge, and personal strengths and resources.

It may be that latent awareness of the importance of addressing academic and intellectual and personal goals together is one of the factors behind the current interest in Open Education. Here I would like to introduce another distinction, namely the distinction between classes which are open and classes which are empty.

The goal of the open classroom approach is to help children make sense out of their own experiences, their own environments and their own feelings. It is an approach which helps children to acquire the basic skills of learning as tools with which to examine, analyze, record, observe, measure, explore, describe and organize their experiences. These seem to me to be developmentally appropriate intellectual goals for

young children. It is an approach to education which is open to children's own interests, but not open in terms of the standards with which those interests are pursued. In the empty classroom everything is treated as equally worth doing, equally worth knowing, or equally worthless. It may be open to all interests, but no expectations or standards of work are expressed, no demands are made and no conformity is required. Good open education for young children can help children to make sense out of their experience. So many of the children we are trying to help live in complex, unpredictable - and rich - environments. It seems to me that if you cannot understand most of the events around you, you come to feel stupid. There are many children who wander through their universes feeling overwhelmed, feeling that they never can or will understand it. In the good open classroom teachers alert children to those events and phenomena in the childrens' own environments which are worth knowing about, which are important, and the understanding of which could help the child to organize his own experience.

Here I would like to introduce another distinction, namely between being an authoritarian teacher and an authoritative teacher. An authoritarian teacher is one who makes demands on children, sets expectations for children, insists on conformity to arbitary requirements without support, warmth, encouragement, or explanation. On the other hand, the authoritative teacher combines both warmth and strength, encouragement and exactness, conformity and explanation. These qualities must all come together. In addition to combining these qualities the authoritative

PS 006084

teacher treats children's opinions and feelings as valid. She is sensitive to their feelings and opinions, but she is not pushed around by them. Children need adults, and to be loved by people they can perceive as strong. The love from a strong person who is himself or herself self-respecting is crucial for development. To withhold making demands and setting reasonable standards and expectations is to abdicate the authority ascribed to adults.

Another distinction I would like to make is between teaching and performing. This is a difficult distinction to define. Perhaps the best way to approach it is to share my concern about teachers who do what they do in order to please a third person who is not even there. Often they say that what they're doing, let's say in kindergarten, is done because the first grade teacher who will receive her pupils, expects her to "cover" it. This is a type of "education for after-life" - always rationalizing today's ped gogy in terms of the next life. Sometimes teachers tell me they do such and such because of the "parents". On further questioning it so often turns out to be one vocal parent from among thirty contented or indifferent ones. Of course there's always the "administration" to blame. Far too often it is the janitor who causes teachers' behavior. Then again it's the testers or evaluators downtown. The list of obtrusive others for whom teachers perform is a long one. How can we teach if we are constantly performing? Teaching requires a high degree of vigilance and awareness of the minds, feelings and wishes of each individual child. On stage, one must be aware of the

audience, and thereby miss the complex cues embedded in the children's behavior.

This takes me to another distinction, namely the distinction between children having fun and children getting satisfaction. To provide children with programs of activities that are fun is too cheap a goal. We must offer children the chance to gain the kind of satisfaction that comes from problem solving, from problem posing, from hard work, from effort and from mastery, and we are unfair to children when we fail to encourage them to tackle the difficult and, occasionally, the tedious.

Here I would like to add a very similar distinction, that of the distinction between excitement and learning. Most of us have a fairly even level of activity, although for each individual that typical or even level varies. If you picture this level in your mind as a sort of straight line, and then introduce into the environment of someone at his own typical level of activity an exciting experience, the level of activity goes up. However, it cannot stay up. Excitement, by definition, cannot be maintained. It has to come down. What concerns me is that when the activity level comes down, it does not come down to the earlier level. It goes below this level and it is then that depression and mistrust set in and apathy is common. What you have to do in order to get moving again is to find an activity that is twice as exciting as the first one and you are thus constantly on a spiral of thrills.

One of the major concerns here is that it seems to me that the real work of this world is not exciting. We like to portray the lives of physicians and lawyers as constant series of peak experiences. But we might consider the fact that the real health of our communities is maintained by physicians who give you booster shots and who look at sore throats, perhaps 200 a week; looking at sore throats cannot be exciting. Furthermore, the physician who maintains the community's health looks at each sore throat alertly so as to catch potentially significant indicators of serious complications.

It seems to me that instead of trying to get children excited we should foster their capacity to find the universe interesting. Strengthening children's capacities for sustained interest and effort would be more worthy of them. We have to remember that introducing things to children because they are exciting, that is, aiming for cheap goals, is a pervasive quality of our whole society. Notice how often people use the term exciting around you. People have learned to expect that. We seem to have taught the children who are now adolescents to expect to be excited, to be entertained and titillated. But you cannot learn much that way. Learning means getting involved and pursuing a line of reasoning or thought or inquiry. If we teach our children to expect thrills each day we seriously handicap them. In early childhood programs - and in other segments of our society - we have become accustomed to settling for cheap thrills and quick success, which may in fact be hollow success.

In the recent years of rapid expansion in early childhood education, we exaggerated its power to overcome long-standing social, psychological and economic problems. We now need to take stock of what we have learned and settle down to the long labor ahead of us.

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Postscript

The Educational Resources Information Center/Early Childhood Education Clearinghouse (ERIC/ECE) is one of a system of 18 clearinghouses sponsored by the United States Office of Education to provide the educational community with information about current research and developments in the field of education. The clearinghouses, each focusing on a specific area of education, (such as early childhood, reading, linguistics, and exceptional children), are located at universities and institutions throughout the United States.

The clearinghouses search systematically to acquire current, significant documents relevant to education. These research studies, speeches, conference proceedings, curriculum guides, and other publications are abstracted, indexed, and published in Research in Education (RIE), a monthly journal. RIE is available at libraries, or may be ordered from the Superintendent of Documents, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C. 20402.

Another ERIC publication is Current Index to Journals in Education (CIJE), a monthly guide to periodical literature which cites articles in more than 560 journals and magazines in the field of education. Articles are indexed by subject, author, and journal contents. CIJE is available at libraries, or by subscription from CCM Information Corporation, 909 Third Avenue, New York, New York 10022.

The Early Childhood Education Clearinghouse (ERIC/ECE) also distributes a free, current awareness newsletter which singles out RIE and CIJE articles of special interest, and reports on new books, articles, and conferences. The ERIC/ECE Newsletter also describes practical projects currently in progress, as reported by teachers and administrators. For more information, or to receive the Newsletter write: ERIC/ECE Clearinghouse, 805 W. Pennsylvania Avenue, Urbana, Illinois 61801.

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*ERIC/ECE is responsible for research documents on the physiological, psychological, and cultural development of children from birth through age eight, with major focus on educational theory, research and practice related to the development of young children.